

Akron Industrial Incubator Hatches More Successes in EC Akron, Ohio, EC

Founded in 1983 the Akron Industrial Incubator (AII) exists to ensure that businesses in the startup phase have access to the information and support necessary for success. Entrepreneurs can rent space from AII at below-market rates and access a wide variety of administrative, management, technical, and professional services. Such services may include assistance with business planning, operations, marketing, financing, accounting, legal issues, employee issues, and loan and grant pre-applications. AII clients may also take advantage of a Service Corps of Retired Executives mentoring program and are eligible to participate in group insurance.

Through March 2000 AII clients have created more than 500 jobs with \$30 million in annual payroll. Recognizing the important contributions AII provided to the business community, the Akron EC decided to help finance a new business incubator space and services in downtown Akron. Through a consortium of banks, the EC, the U.S. Small Business Administration, and the City of Akron, \$1 million in financing was made available in 1 year alone to 92 firms located in the EC or employing EC residents.

For more information contact Michael Lehere, General Manager, AII, at 216-375-2173.

“Safe Haven” Only a Part of Weed and Seed Agenda

Akron, Ohio, EC

The Akron EC is involved in a special initiative called Safe Haven, occurring through a U.S. Department of Justice Weed and Seed grant. Safe Haven is a violence prevention strategy targeting at-risk youth within and around the EC. Prevention activities include afterschool recreation programs, summer recreation activities, monthly Family Nights, weekly coffee hours, and an annual community celebration. Educational opportunities such as information fairs and seminars (on a variety of topics including employment, homeownership, and health and wellness), in-school and afterschool tutoring programs, and substance abuse prevention programs for students “plant the seed of learning.” Safe Haven aims to provide both a safe social climate and a fun learning environment for Akron residents.

Operation Weed and Seed is a multi-agency strategy that “weeds out” violent crime, gang activity, drug use, and drug trafficking in targeted neighborhoods, then “seeds” the target area by restoring these neighborhoods through social and economic revitalization. The Weed and Seed strategy recognizes the importance of linking and integrating law enforcement and criminal justice efforts with social service, private sector, and community efforts to maximize the impact of existing programs and resources. Community residents must be empowered to assist in solving problems in their neighborhoods.

For more information contact Thomas A. Tatum, City Planner III, Akron Department of Planning and Urban Development, at 330-375-2090.

Plastics Training Project Molds New Job Force

Akron, Ohio, EC

With more than 30,000 jobs at 400 plastics and polymer companies in northeast Ohio, the Akron EC saw an opportunity to use the burgeoning industry to get inner-city residents off welfare and out of dead-end jobs. The EC collaborated with the University of Akron Polymer Training Center to produce the Sebert Project, a training program in polymers and plastics for EC residents.

The 60-hour, 4-week course provides the training necessary to get an entry-level job in the plastics industry. Trainees are given drug tests before the training, transit passes if they need them, and a \$5-per-day food allowance. Tayba Tahir, Program Coordinator, says, "Two weeks of the program are dedicated to what we call soft skills—mathematical and writing skills—and the basics of how to be a responsible and productive employee."

The other 2 weeks are devoted to hands-on training in plastics molding, thermo-forming, and extrusion work. Bob Digiantonio, Instructor for the project, teaches documentation, moisture analysis, and recognition of molding defects. He also covers Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards. "But we want students to go beyond merely receiving an entry-level job," says Digiantonio. "We want students to see the career potential of plastics industry jobs."

Graduates receive a referral to one of a dozen participating plastics firms. In 1998 three training sessions were held at the University of Akron's Polymer Training Center. Of the 34 people who participated, 23 graduated and were placed in jobs. Joe Quinby, who had no previous background in plastics, graduated last year. He is now a machine operator in the thermoforming department at Landmark Plastics. "This program has given me a second chance for school," he says. Olean Cherry also graduated last year. Now an employee at Spunfab Adhesives Company, she says, "The program offered me the chance to get off welfare and into a permanent job, which is what I had been looking for since I went on welfare in 1995."

Employers are also happy. Jim Camper, Plant Manager at Spunfab, says, "These are good employees and the training program has prepared them to work here. They have the chance to advance in the job." Four more sessions are planned for 1999.

For more information contact Jerry Egan, Akron Department of Planning and Urban Development, at 330-375-2090.

Akron Parents Use Small Loans for Transportation

Akron, Ohio, EC

The transition to economic self-sufficiency is not easy. Most households do not have enough income or reserves to weather even the smallest financial crises. If they qualify for loans, which they often do not, they pay exorbitant interest rates.

Akron's Family Loan Program, piloted through Family Services, a private non-profit group, has been helping EC residents become self-sufficient since 1996. Ways to Work, a revolving loan program funded by the McKnight and Knight foundations, provided the seed money for the Family Loan Program, one of three replication sites of a program piloted in Minnesota in 1984. Ways to Work hopes to raise \$28 million this year to expand the program from 19 to 45 cities during the next decade.

Akron's program provides small loans to low-income residents with children to support work, education, or vocational training. Parents must be working at least 20 hours per week or pursuing school or vocational training and have enough income to make the monthly payments. The maximum is a 2-year, \$3,000 loan at 8 percent, which can be used for transportation, housing costs, medical care, childcare, or work-related expenses.

Kevin Stewart, Coordinator of the Family Loan Program, says, "I was overwhelmed at the number of requests and the consistency of requests for car loans." Ninety-five percent of the requests are for car loans and most come from single women.

The program works carefully with all applicants, providing consumer credit counseling, advice about credit restoration, and credit bureau report review through the Consumer Credit Counseling Service. The loan approval rate is about 50 percent, says Stewart. But if the applicant is denied a loan, Stewart always asks, "Is this the final 'no'?" He considers individual circumstances and helps applicants devise financial plans of action. Since the beginning of the program, nearly 180 loans totaling \$380,000 have been made to EC residents.

"We've been very, very pleased with the loan repayment rate," which is 88 percent, higher than the national average, says Stewart. With a revolving loan fund, it is essential that borrowers pay off their loans so that funds are available for the next person. "The repayment rate indicates a sound program and says even more about the seriousness with which borrowers take their responsibility."

Borrowers benefit in other ways, too. Stewart asks, "How do you put a value on being able to go to a child's afterschool function instead of sitting on a bus for 2 or 3 hours? There is a quality-of-life issue involved that is easy to see and harder to document, but I know it's there." A case in point is Samantha Jones, who juggles rearing her three children, working at a part-time job, and taking social work classes at the University of Akron. With a loan and Stewart's advice, she got a good deal on a used car. "This will definitely help me in being able to reach the goals that I have," she says, "financially, academically, and for my family."

For more information contact Jerry Egan, Akron Department of Planning and Urban Development, at 330-375-2090.

Family Services Specialists Remove Roadblocks to Learning

Akron, Ohio, EC

Akron has dedicated \$95,000 of its Enterprise Community funds to helping schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This money goes to fund afterschool programs such as magicians' workshops, a model builders' club, and a ham radio operator's course where pupils can earn their licenses. At some schools, the EC funds have been used to initiate a confidential focus group by the Community Drug Board, a boys club run by Family Solutions, and a girls club run by the Catholic Services League. In addition, the money has been used to hire family-services specialists who run social-services programs and help connect individual families to community services. These specialists work to remove the roadblocks to learning, providing students and their families with linkages to programs that provide food, clothing, and shelter, as well as individual, family, and peer counseling.

For more information, contact Jerry Egan, city of Akron Department of Planning and Urban Development, at 330-375-2090.

Students Get Guidance on Manufacturing Careers

Akron, Ohio, EC

In the workplace of tomorrow, factory workers must possess highly developed computer skills, the capacity to adapt to rapid innovations in technology, and the ability to manage their own careers in an environment of constant change. In Akron, Ohio, the Middle School Technical Career Preparation initiative is working with the four middle schools that serve EC students to teach these skills.

“Early exposure to these concepts is critical to later and greater work success by students and for manufacturers,” explains Akron Mayor David F. Plusquellic. Approximately 150 eighth-grade students at each school participate in a course of study that provides hands-on experience with workplace technology and guides teens in career planning. This approach is especially useful for students not interested in college.

The Akron Public Schools developed a unique shared-staffing arrangement so that a knowledgeable teacher teaches a particular segment at different times at each school. The city’s EC program contributed \$100,000 from EZ/EC SSBG funds and \$175,000 from Ohio’s program grant. These funds renovated classrooms and purchased computers, software, and special machine-tooling teaching devices (mills, cranes, and boring equipment), as well as videotapes and other materials on career opportunities. The school system supplied the teachers, the curriculum, and an ongoing commitment of about \$140,000 per year to operate this program for many years to come.

The impact of this strategic investment is already evident. High schools have strengthened their technology education classes to accommodate the advanced skills of the incoming freshmen who have participated in the middle school program.

For more information, contact Jerry Egan, City of Akron, Department of Planning and Urban Development, at 330-375-2090.

Abandoned School Site Yields New Homeownership Chances

Akron, Ohio, EC

In the Lane-Wooster neighborhood of the Akron EC, a symbol of blight has become a major asset for homeownership.

The new asset rose on the site of the former Lane Elementary School, built in the 1890s and vacant since its decommissioning by the Akron Public Schools in the mid-1970s. Unlike other public school buildings, the marketplace judged Lane to be too old, too deteriorated, and most importantly, too poorly situated for new uses. Not located on a major street with good visibility and accessibility, but well within a residential neighborhood, the old school building passed from owner to owner, remaining abandoned, its scrawled graffiti and broken glass acting as a backdrop for an open-air drug market.

The mid-1990s brought signs of hope. Even before the EC was established, neighborhood residents began organizing, establishing block clubs and safety watches, and petitioning the city for action and investment in the neighborhood. In 1993, the city used CDBG funds to purchase and demolish the building at a cost of \$250,000. This move set the stage for a series of vigorous redevelopment efforts.

First, the Urban Neighborhood Development Corporation (UNDC), a city-sponsored nonprofit group, built Millerview, a development of 10 new houses on the site of the demolished school. Priced at \$65,000, the three-bedroom, vinyl-sided homes on 7,200-square-foot lots, with two-car garages sold readily. Construction on Millerview began in 1995, with the last house sold in December 1997. UNDC built 4 other houses nearby and planning for another 10 is well under way. These houses are sold at market-rate without any homeowner subsidy. CDBG funds assisted with site-development costs.

With the Millerview anchor in place, a combined effort of three groups—the East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation, the Westside Neighborhood Development Corporation, and Neighborhood Revitalization Partners—created 35 new single-family houses and 5 rehabilitated houses on infill lots on the streets east of the Lane School site. Begun in 1996, these three- and four-bedroom houses were completed by late 1997 at an average cost of \$94,000. Low-income families now occupy them on a lease-purchase arrangement. The \$3.6 million financing included \$2,470,200 in Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), \$300,000 in city HOME funds, \$300,000 in State of Ohio HOME funds, and \$575,000 in mortgage financing. Lane-Wooster is only one of several neighborhoods in the Akron EC that have received a positive jolt from the LIHTC initiative, building many new houses in the area in a short time.

Area homeowners are also partners in the improvement effort. Through Akron's Neighborhood Housing Petition Program, they are organizing in groupings of 1 to 4 blocks (between 20 and 80 houses) and circulating a petition agreeing to bring their housing up to code in return for city CDBG-funded grants and loans. Competitive funding is awarded according to the percentage of homeowners signing up. In Lane-Wooster, 6 street segments, containing 183 houses, are participating in this effort. The city will make infrastructure improvements to the streets, such as new sidewalks, curbing, and street trees to complement the housing improvements.

Today new, single-family homes and freshly rehabilitated properties stand where the crime-ridden eyesore of the Lane School once stood. The neighborhood's other assets—a public library branch, a large city park, and a performing arts magnet middle school—are coming into their own.

For more information, contact Jerry Egan, City of Akron, Department of Planning and Urban Development, at 330-375-2090.